

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Ekev, Deuteronomy, Chapters 7-11 | August 24, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

A Tale of Two Psalms

As Israel-hating hordes descend this week on the streets of my hometown Chicago to demonstrate against the Jewish state, it behooves us to ponder anew the remarkable way in which Jews, for millennia, demonstrated their bond of love to the Holy Land. And our *parashah* allows us to appreciate one seemingly simple, and profoundly powerful, way that they did so.

Much of our reading is filled with praise for the glories of the Land of Israel, as well as exhortations from Moses to the people divinely destined to inhabit it. Moses describes the land's bounty in language that resonates to this day:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, of vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees, and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. (Deuteronomy 8:7-9)

Moses is not merely seeking to excite the Israelites about the bounty that is yet to come; rather, he seeks to remind them of the Being to Whom they ought to remain eternally grateful for this bounty, and for the land that contains it. He therefore adds:

And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. (Deuteronomy 8:10)

From this verse, the rabbis tell us, is derived the obligation of *birkat ha-mazon*, the “blessing after the meal.” This is recited by traditional Jews after every meal containing bread, anywhere in the world, but the original verse clearly emphasizes that the obligation is intended to inculcate gratitude for the land. And indeed, the blessing to this day contains an entire section thanking God for the granting of the Land of Israel to the Jewish people.

For Moses, the obligation to bless God in gratitude for the land includes with it a profound political and religious lesson: ingratitude, hedonism, and narcissism embody a threat to the wellbeing of any society, and the Israelites are warned lest they succumb to these temptations, lest they see the bounty of the land as merely a sign of their own greatness:



Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments, and his ordinances, and his statutes, which I command you this day: lest when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses, and live in them; and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. (Deuteronomy 8:11–14)

As Rabbi Sacks put it, were one to summarize Deuteronomy, its message would first and foremost be this:

[T]he obligation to bless God in gratitude for the land includes with it a profound political and religious lesson: ingratitude, hedonism, and narcissism embody a threat to the wellbeing of any society . . .

eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase, when all you have is multiplied—it is then you must beware lest your heart becomes proud and you forget God . . .

Moses gives voice to the most counter-intuitive message imaginable—and it came true. The greatest challenge is not slavery but freedom; not poverty but affluence; not danger but security; not homelessness but home. The paradox is that when we have most to thank God for, that is when we are in greatest danger of not thanking—nor even thinking of—God at all.

Thus, later in the reading, after describing what occurred 40 years before—the sin of the golden calf and the shattering of the Tablets—Moses makes clear that the obligations that today are so synonymous with Jewish observance—mezuzah, *t'filin*, and the teaching of the Torah—also serve the purpose of acting as constant reminders for the Israelites that the land is a gift of God, and that with this gift comes obligations:

You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house, and upon your gates, **that your days, and the days of your children, may be multiplied in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give them**, as long as the heavens are above the earth. (Deuteronomy 11:18–21)

But of course, the blessing after meals, which describes the goodness of the Holy Land and Jerusalem, was recited by Jews even when the land was very far away, and when the time Jews would return *en masse* seemed equally distant. And Jews were no doubt aware of the chasm between the context in which the obligation of

For forty years you and your parents wandered in the wilderness. . . . only by a series of miracles did you have anything to eat or drink. Now you have reached the brink of the promised land. You think this will be the end of all your challenges. But it will not be. To the contrary, it is here that the challenge will begin—and it will be the hardest of all because it will not look like a challenge. ‘When you



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birkat ha-mazon was first bestowed, and the historical reality of the age in which they found themselves. And thus there developed what was once a widespread custom: during most of the week, the blessing after meals was preceded by Psalm 137, which describes the pain of the exiles in Babylon following the first destruction of Jewish Jerusalem:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. (Psalms 137:1–5)

The recitation of this psalm reflected the fact that the blessing originally intended to inspire gratitude from those dwelling on the land was now being recited in exile from the land.

But then, on the Sabbath, after a meal in which the sorrow and persecution of the week momentarily faded, the psalm would be replaced by another:

When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. (Psalm 126:1)

The recitation of a psalm sung by those who returned from exile in Babylon to the land thereby linked the mourning and remembrance of Jerusalem that was with the Zion that was yet to be.

These two psalms, linked to a blessing after meals that is itself linked to the land, reflect the essence of Jewish endurance, and both the psalm of exile and the psalm of return must be taken together in tandem. The recitation of the former after so many meals reflects the fact that the Jewish people did not whistle in the dark; they did not deny, following the destruction of Jerusalem, the terrible tragedy that had occurred to them. As Michael Wyschogrod has noted, the very fact that Jews mourned Jerusalem for centuries, rather than asserting that Judaism could continue unimpeded elsewhere, reflects the Jewish capacity for honest assessment of defeat. But the second psalm, recited on the Sabbath, embodied the Jewish capacity for hope, and for faith in return, a hope amid exile that has no parallel. And the simple recitation of both psalms allows us to understand the way in which a people exiled from its land never forgot it, and never stopped feeling grateful for God's gift of it.

One man who made this clear was Menachem Begin, at the White House signing of the peace treaty with Egypt. In preparation, Begin wrote out his own draft of his remarks, and then gave it to his speechwriter Yehuda Avner, asking him, as he put it, to “shakespearize” it. Avner tells us in his own memoir that he edited the speech, left the final draft for Begin in his suite, and attended a reception. Avner recounts the surprising scene that followed:

Hardly had I picked up a salad plate when Ovad, a member of the prime minister's security detail, accosted me, telling me that Begin was searching for me urgently. He dialed a classified number and put me through.



“Mr. Begin, you’re looking for me?” I panted.

“Yes, where’s my speech?”

“On the desk by the window in your suite, where you told me to put it.”

“No, not that one—my original.”

“It’s in my pocket. You need it?”

“Yes—immediately!”

“When are you leaving for the White House?”

“At twelve forty.”

I looked at my watch. The dial said twelve twenty. A shiver ran down my spine. “I’ll bring it over right away,” I said, not having the slightest idea how. But then I spied Secretary of State Cyrus Vance casually chatting with an Egyptian, and in desperation, brandished the speech in his face and said with deadly seriousness, “Mr. Secretary, unless I get this document to Mr. Begin at the Hilton Hotel within ten minutes there will be no signing ceremony today.”

After recounting the way he was rushed back to Begin’s hotel, Avner continues:

I ran into the lobby just as Mr. and Mrs. Begin were exiting an elevator surrounded by a bevy of bodyguards.

“*Baruch Hashem!*” cried Begin when I handed him the pages. “Thank God you caught me!”

“The speech that I left on your desk—it’s not what you wanted?” I asked, somewhat peeved. “You weren’t happy with my changes?”

“Oh, no, they’re fine,” he assured me. “It’s just that as I was going over the typed text I suddenly had the feeling that today of all days I want to read my own speech exactly as I wrote in my own hand.” And to make the implicit explicit, he added, “I wrote it from the heart and I want to read it from the heart.”

So Avner informs us. And I am convinced that when Begin spoke of words from the heart, he referred especially to the end of his speech, where the prime minister, in an extraordinary moment that I discussed in my “Sacred Time” presentation about Tisha b’Av, said the following:

Therefore, it is the proper place, and the appropriate time, to bring back to memory the song and prayer of thanksgiving I learned as a child in the home of father and mother, that doesn’t exist anymore because they were among the six million people—men, women, and children—who sanctified the Lord’s name with their sacred blood which reddened the rivers of Europe from the Rhine to the Danube, from the Bug to the Volga, because—only because—they were born Jews; and because they didn’t have a country of their own, and neither a valiant Jewish army to defend them; and because nobody—nobody—came



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to their rescue, although they cried out “Save us! Save us!” *de profundis*, from the depths of the pit and agony. That is the Song of Degrees written two millennia and 500 years ago when our forefathers returned from their first exile to Jerusalem and Zion.

Then Begin took out a *kippah*, placed it on his head, and declaimed in Hebrew:

Shir ha-m'alot, When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream.

Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing . . . (Psalms 126:1–2)

This moment, unforgettable to so many, reflected the fact that the simple recitation of a psalm helped keep a land enshrined in the hearts of the Jewish people. And it also allowed us to understand how the psalm allowed one family, in Eastern Europe, to mold a child with a love of the land, and an appreciation for the way in which Jews in exile kept the hope for the land alive, ultimately returning and vindicating this hope. As we see scenes of hate on city streets, we remember that the simple blessing after the meal is linked to one of the greatest miracles in the history of the world, a miracle linked to a love of land that lasted millennia, and to a people that has endured and outlasted the hatred of centuries. One that isn't going anywhere.

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